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CIA, journalists disagree on news ethics

By Richard Hoops

The guarded border between the press and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has grown tense during the past month. The CIA is showing new interest in using reporters as agents but is cracking down on agents who want to report about the agency.

Many fears of CIA involvement with the media were laid to rest several years ago by self-imposed agency regulations. Journalists' concern has been renewed by the Feb. 19 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Snepp v. United States* and by the opposition of both the CIA and the Carter administration to sections of a proposed charter for U.S. intelligence agencies that would protect reporters.

The Supreme Court ruling in the case of Frank Snepp, a CIA agent-turned-reporter, upheld as constitutional a CIA contract requiring prior agency approval of any book written about it by a past or present employee. Editorials across the country denounced the ruling as a serious blunder into delicate First Amendment territory. The CIA, an agency representative said, is "delighted" by the ruling.

A touchy issue in the new charter—the National Intelligence Act of

1980—is a provision to clearly separate journalist and government agencies like the CIA. In the past, the press has been tapped by the CIA for agents, information and cover. Former CIA director George Bush limited these practices in 1976, and a year later the CIA's current director, Stansfield Turner, banned agency contact with journalists, clerics and academics, except in rare instances. But in recent testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Turner said he opposes legislated restrictions of the CIA's use of journalists and admitted that he has made exceptions to his own rules.

In a February visit to Minneapolis, Turner also labeled the unwillingness of reporters to cooperate with the CIA as "cynical and disloyal."

Not everyone shares Turner's sentiments. "I'm not under the impression that reporters are under any obligation to be loyal to the CIA," said Bobby Ray Miller, deputy foreign editor for United Press International (UPI). "What we are under the obligation to do is to be loyal to fairness and unbiased reporting. That means not being members of the CIA, the KGB or anything else."

The agency maintains it is not trying to revert to days when the press was open territory.

"We're not advocating the use of journalists," said Herb Hetu, public affairs director for the CIA. "We agree that they should not be used except in extraordinary circumstances," he said.

Interaction between the press and the CIA goes back as far as the agency itself. The CIA received routine briefings from correspondents in the 1950s and actively employed reporters in the 1970s.

Convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt told a Senate panel and the New York Times in 1973 that his duties as a former CIA officer included financing a Washington, D.C., news service and subsidizing a travel guide publisher. The news service, Continental Press, provided material for foreign clients; the travel guide, Fodor's Modern Guides, gave CIA agents cover as travel writers.

In 1976, after inquiries into abuses by U.S. intelligence agencies, the select committee reported the CIA had subsidized hundreds of books during the 1960s. One of them, a book about China, was even favorably reviewed in the New York Times—by a CIA agent.

A section of the new charter, written by the select committee, would prohibit activities like these. Part D of the bill bars any agent's "real or ostensible" affiliation with a U.S. media organization for use as a cover. A select committee representative said the ban would extend to religious and academic institutions and to any media abroad that might influence domestic news, except when the government's role is acknowledged.

Both the Carter administration and the CIA oppose the press restrictions. The CIA would rather rely on its own internal guidelines, the committee representative said. "They (CIA and administration) don't want it hardened into law."

The CIA opposes the press ban because it "would tie our hands too much," agency spokesman Hetu said. The agency would rather follow its own regulations, which allow use of journalists with the director's approval, he said, because "we want to have that option under specialized circumstances."

UPI's Miller disagreed and said "the CIA and American journalism should be kept very separate." Any chance that a reporter could be a CIA agent creates suspicion, Miller said. This causes problems for reporters, he added, because even if none of them are agents, "the suspicion will be there that all of them are."

Also under Senate consideration is a bill which would exempt the CIA from parts of the Freedom of Information Act that allows public access to the unclassified files of government agencies. The bill—the Intelligence Reform Act of 1980—is sponsored by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.). It would also prohibit any past or present CIA employee from naming undercover agents. Moynihan last month withdrew one section of the bill that would outlaw publishing names of CIA agents. Critics pointed out that if the bill had been law during the Watergate investigation, printing conspirator Hunt's name would have been illegal because of his connection to the CIA.

Press advocates support a ban on CIA use of journalists, arguing that when CIA agents and reporters collaborate or become one and the same, the media is compromised.

Hetu disagreed. "I don't see how it does that," he said. "Are journalists such moral weaklings that they need a law to protect them from this?"

Miller countered that credibility is a critical issue. "A reader should have the confidence in what he reads in the newspaper and hears on the radio and television newscasts, to believe that what he hears is the truth and not some CIA plant or the official U.S. government line," he said.

"Journalism," he added, "is not an arm of the U.S. government."